



Open and Distance Learning (ODL) as a Viable Provider of Quality Higher Education: The Case of Open University Malaysia (OUM)

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Abstract

With today's highly intense international competition, countries, particularly those in the developing world, have no choice but to turn to education to enhance the productive capability of their human capital in order to remain competitive and sustainable. With the current global economic crisis, this task has become even more urgent and pertinent. In this regard, open and distance learning (ODL) has gained increasing acceptance as a provider of quality education to the masses in these countries. This paper shares the experience of Open University Malaysia (OUM) as the first and foremost ODL University in Malaysia in providing quality education to its learners. With its motto, "University for All", OUM utilises the blended mode of delivery, leveraging significantly on the latest appropriate technology, to effectively contribute towards increasing access to higher education. The paper also outlines OUM's unique challenges as an ODL higher education institution (HEI) as well as measures that had been undertaken to address them through appropriate policies, processes and practices. The experience of OUM provides evidence to reaffirm the belief that an ODL HEI is indeed a viable provider of quality higher education for all.

Introduction

With today's highly intense international competition, countries, particularly those in the developing world, have no choice but to turn to education to enhance the productive capability of their human capital in order to remain competitive and sustainable. With the current global economic crisis, this task has become even more urgent and pertinent. Malaysia is one of the countries that had placed higher education as one of the priority sectors in its national socio-economic planning. The setting up of the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) in 2004 is a testimony of this. Even before that, in 1996, with the introduction of a set of Acts of Parliaments, such as the Private Higher Education Act, the country has introduced a number of liberalization measures to enhance the role of private sector in higher education. Consequently, the number of private higher education institutions in the country had increased tremendously henceforth. To date there are 52 private universities in Malaysia including 17 college universities, 5 foreign university campuses and 328 private colleges making a total of 362 private HEIs in the country (MOHE, 2008).

Malaysia has embraced itself to become a centre of education excellence. To this end, a number of national higher education targets had been specifically set. For example, the higher education participation rate for the 18-25 years cohort is targeted at 40 percent by 2010. The percentage of the country's labour force with tertiary education is projected to be 33.3 percent by 2020 (RM9). Of course, quantitative targets, though necessary are certainly not a sufficient condition to ensure that the country becomes the preferred choice for higher education in the region. What is more important is the quality of higher education. With the increased globalization and worldwide liberalization of higher education, cross-border education has become a prominent feature of the current higher education scenario.

World higher education has seen a tremendous growth in learner population. In 2000, the number learners in higher education institution worldwide were 100 million. In 2007, this number has increased to 150.2 million (UNESCO). In addition, with the advent of the Internet and the all-pervasive information explosion, there has been an increase in learner diversity. The current cohort of learners are more digital savvy, more mobile and more demanding in their quest for higher education. This presents a big challenge to higher education institution. Either we change our philosophy, programmes and delivery modes to meet the needs of this new breed of learners or we perish. Another significant trend in higher education today is the increasing number of working adults seeking to enhance their academic qualifications in order to move up their career ladder. At the same time, due to the knowledge explosion whereby the body of knowledge in a particular discipline is changing as a rapid rate, working adults find it necessary to upgrade themselves regularly to keep up with their work. Thus personal and professional development in the form of lifelong learning has become a way of life. Governments, particularly of developing nations have recognized this and are providing various incentives to promote lifelong learning among its citizens.

An equally interesting phenomenon that is transforming the role of HEIs in many countries is internationalization of higher education. Today more than 2.5 million students are studying outside their home countries and this figure is estimated to increase to 7.0 million 2020 (UNESCO). For countries like Malaysia, where the population is relatively small (28 million at the end of 2008), the way forward for its higher education sector is to go international. In this regard, one of the seven pillars of MOHE's Higher Education Strategic Plan 2020 is internationalization (MOHE). At the end of 2008, the number of international learners in Malaysia HEIs was slightly more than 69,000. This represents only about 8.4 percent of the current enrolment of all HEIs in Malaysia. The target as is to achieve a ratio of 10 percent of international students by 2020 (MOHE). It is interesting to note that Iran is ranked third in the list of all countries and highest in the list of Middle-East countries that have their international students in Malaysia in 2008 (Table 1).

Amidst all these exciting trends, the emergence of open universities since 1969 has the effect of revolutionizing higher education throughout the globe. With its open and distance learning (ODL) mode of delivery enhanced, further by the advent of e- and m-learning, open universities has opened up many opportunities to those who aspire to enhance their academic and professional qualifications not provided by conventional universities before. Without doubt, ODL institutions have widen access to higher education and brought education within reach of many through the

philosophy of higher education at any time, at any place, in any way and for any one. ODL has taken the higher education market like a storm. Today, it is estimated that 30% of all students in HEIs are ODL learners (UNESCO).

Objective of paper

The objective of this paper is to share OUM's experience as an ODL HEI in providing quality education or Q-education to its learners. As the first ODL university in the country introducing its own blend of teaching and learning mode, OUM had to face a number of challenges not experienced by its conventional counterparts before. This paper will outline some of these challenges and share OUM's way to overcome them. Finally, the paper will also provide some recommendations on how an ODL institution should move forward in providing quality education for all.

Table 1: Total Enroment of International Learners in Malaysian Higher Education Institutions by Country of Origin (Top 25) in 2008

No.	Country	Public	Private	Total
1	Indonesia	3,402	5,896	9,298
2	China	1,525	6,452	7,977
3	Iran	2,945	3,659	6,604
4	Nigeria	381	5,043	5,424
5	Yemen	1,353	2,929	4,282
6	Saudi Arabia	516	2,236	2,752
7	Boswana	n.a.	2,348	2,348
8	Sudan	529	1,778	2,307
9	Bangladesh	341	1,680	2,021
10	Libya	635	1,153	1,788
11	Iraq	972	649	1,621
12	Pakistan	189	1,325	1,514
13	Republic of Korea	n.a.	1,479	1,479
14	Thailand	803	661	1,464
15	Somalia	496	894	1,390
16	Maldives	209	1,156	1,365
17	India	274	1,039	1,313
18	Sri Lanka	n.a.	1,014	1,014
19	Kenya	n.a.	729	729
20	United Rep of Tanzania	n.a.	592	592
21	Jordan	544	n.a.	544
22	Singapore	402	n.a.	402
23	Palestine	208	n.a.	208
24	Brunei Darussalam	148	n.a.	148
25	Oman	137	n.a.	137
26	Others	2,476	7,967	10,443
	Total	18,485	50,679	69,164

OUM as a viable provider of Q-education

OUM was established as the seventh private university of Malaysia in May 2001. It is a unique model in that while it is incorporated as a private university under the Private Higher Education Act, 1996, it is owned by the country's first eleven public universities. The vice-chancellors of these eleven public universities serve as the members of the Board of Directors of the university and the President/Vice Chancellor of the university reports to them on a quarterly basis. At the same time, since it is registered under the country's higher education act, it is subjected to the rules and regulations imposed by the MOHE as well Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA), previously known as the National Accreditation Board (LAN).

OUM's vision is, "to be the leading provider of flexible learning" and its mission is, "to widen access to quality education and provide lifelong learning opportunities by leveraging on technology, adopting flexible mode of learning, and providing a conducive and engaging learning environment at competitive and affordable cost." With its motto of "university for all," OUM's primary emphasis is to provide second chance Q-education to the working adults who had missed the opportunity to do so the first time. It also seeks to provide ample opportunities for continuous enhancement of their personal and professional development in the form of lifelong learning through its Institute of Professional Development (IPD) and School of Lifelong Learning (SoLL).

OUM admitted its first intake of 753 learners in four academic programmes in the August Semester of 2001. Since then, the university has growth at a very rapid rate exceeding all the expectations of its founders as well as the general academic fraternity. The progress of the university since 2001 is given in Table 2. The total cumulative learners as at May Semester of 2009 is 86,662. The number of programmes has increased immensely from 4 to 71 while the same is true for the print- and web-based learning materials which saw an increase from 29 to 1,093. OUM employs part-time tutors who are academicians from the local universities as well experts from the industry to conduct its face-to-face and online tutorials. The number of tutors in OUM's database as of May Semester of 2009 was 9,165. However, at any one semester, about 3,000 to 4,000 of these tutors will be engaged at its 61 learning centres situated in all the major cities and towns of the country.

OUM's key success factors (KSFs)

OUM has been successful in providing second chance tertiary education to those who missed the opportunity to do so and those who would like to upgrade their personal and professional qualifications. As can be seen in Table 2, OUM has been able to attract a sizeable number of working adults to enroll in its programmes in the last eight years of its operation. The success of OUM has demonstrated that an ODL institution is indeed a viable provider of Q-education in Malaysia. Let me now share some of the key success factors that had made OUM a premier ODL university in the country.

Blended pedagogy

When the idea of setting up OUM was mooted, its management had decided that it would adopt a blended mode of delivery comprising of self-managed learning, online

or e learning and face-to-face or classroom interactions (Figure 1). The blended mode of delivery is best suited for working adults as it provides the flexibility that enables them to balance between learning and their other commitments. While online learning is regarded as the most flexible learning where learners can learn at anytime and at anyplace, in my observation, Malaysian and for that matter Asian learners still prefer face-to-face learning to be part of their learning mode. Even though the face-to-face interaction at OUM in most instances is only limited to only 10 hours per module, learners learn a great deal in such sessions.

Table 2: Progress of OUM

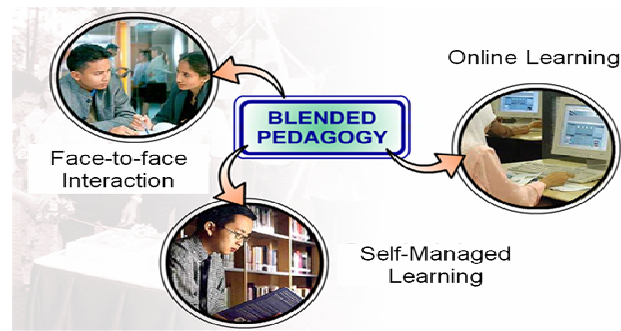
Item	August 2001	May 2009
Cumulative Intake	753	86,662
No. of Programmes Offered	4	71
Learning Materials Developed (Print & Web-based)	29	1,093
Learning Centres	12	61
Tutors	100	9,165
Graduates*	-	13,396

* About 7,000 learners will graduate in the forthcoming 7th Convocation in November 2009.

The Internet has changed the way we work, learn, play, socialize, love, communicate and manage. In this regard, Malaysian learners are very fortunate in that the government had embarked upon a very rigorous information and communication technology (ICT) plan for the country. As a result, Malaysia's ICT penetration rate is one of the highest among developing countries. The widespread use of ICT had enhanced the use of e learning, an opportunity that has been fully exploited by OUM since its inception. Today, OUM is proud to have a very functional and highly regarded e-learning management system or myLMS, which has received international recognition and award. Via myLMS, OUM learners can access their learning materials, interact with their tutors and peers, and update their profiles including their financial obligations to the university at anytime and anywhere as long as there is Internet connection. MyLMS has become so successful with OUM learners that other HEIs have begun to use them for their online delivery platform.

For self-managed learning, OUM also provides printed modules to its learners. These modules are developed in-house by a team of experts comprising of instructional designers, programmers, desktop publishers, language editors and others. OUM places a very high significance to these modules because in our learning system, its learners have to spend a considerable amount of time studying on their own (self-managed learning). OUM takes great care to ensure that its modules are of the highest quality in terms of their content and very learner-friendly with respect to their presentation.

Figure 1: OUM's Blended Mode of Delivery



As an additional online support to its learners, OUM provides a digital library, which has online databases consisting of Electronic Books (e-books) and Electronic Journals (e-journals). E-books enable learners to read and make notes and annotations online, while e-journals can be used to search for articles from scholarly journals worldwide. To date, the library has access to more than 72,500 titles from e-books and 29,566 titles from e-journals. The number of hits is one measure that OUM uses to track the usage of the digital library. It is gratifying to inform the audience that the number of hits for the digital library has been increasing at a very encouraging rate since its inception.

Education for All

In its effort to contribute towards the democratization of education, OUM adopts the motto of “university for all”. In line with that aspiration, OUM has embarked on the following:

Upgrading of in-service teachers

In 2002, the Teacher Education Division (TED) of the Ministry of Education of Malaysia (MOE) agreed to send 18,500 of its in-service teachers into 6 Bachelor of Education Programmes of OUM under MOE-OUM Teacher Upgrading Programme via Distance Education. These teachers were funded by a flexible loan scheme that will be convertible to 75 percent scholarship if they attained a cumulative grade-point average (CGPA) of 2.75 and above. The total intakes were spread over 5 years with each annual intake of 3,500 learners. This marked the beginning of a very successful and rewarding collaboration between TED, MOE and OUM. The collaboration was such a great success that when it ended in 2006, TED, MOE decided to extend the collaboration further by sending more than 19,000 in-service teachers into 2 new programmes, Bachelor of Teaching (SMP) and Bachelor of Teacher ship (SMK). The former includes a special programme for the teachers currently teaching in primary schools situated in the remotest part of the country.

I must admit that this TED-MOE-OUM collaboration is a form of government indirect support to OUM as a budding institution. However, the collaboration also provides the opportunity for OUM to prove itself that it is able to contribute towards quality teacher education in the country. In this regard, I am proud to inform the audience that this has been achieved with a great degree of success.

Industry collaborations

Apart from upgrading of teachers, OUM has also embarked upon the training programmes involving professionals and workers in other sectors. Notable among these are the Executive Diploma Programmes in Manufacturing and Sales Management for Nestle Factory and Sales Supervisors and the Certificate and Diploma in Retail Operations Programmes with Aeon (Jusco), a large Japanese international retail conglomerate. The retail programmes with Aeon-Jusco has been going on since 2002 and that with Nestle has been successful that the programme is being considered by Nestle Top Management for use in its worldwide training programme. Other collaborations include that with our Armed Forces, Dumex, plantation companies and partners in conducting courses for chargemen and in photography.

Special learner groups

Despite being a private university, OUM does not preclude itself from fulfilling its corporate social responsibilities (CSR). In this regard, it has devised very attractive incentives for several groups of the society. These include the senior citizens, the underprivileged, and the outstanding sportsman who had contributed the nation's glory together with their coaches, single mothers and prisoners. Joining the celebration of the golden jubilee anniversary of our nation 31 August 2007, OUM offers a 75 percent discount on the tuition fees for our senior citizens (those born on or before 31 August 1957). This offer has been well received and currently OUM has 919 senior citizens in its enrolment with 52 of them had graduated with either a bachelor's or master's degree.

OUM also offers a similar 75 percent discount on the tuition fees to physically disabled members of our society. This has also been well received and currently 114 physically disabled learners studying with us and 8 have graduated thus far.

As mentioned above, we have designed a very special Bachelor of Teaching (SMP) programmes specifically for the teachers who are currently teaching in primary schools located in the remotest part of the country. Currently, there are 378 such teachers in the programme. The reason why they need a special programme is that being in the remotest part of the country; they have no access to the Internet and the mobile technology. In fact, they only come into contact with the outside world once a month and even that they have to take turns among themselves to do it. The regular blended mode of delivery is definitely inappropriate for these learners.

Finally, starting last year, OUM has also ventured into providing study programmes for prisoners. This programme was first started at the Kajang Prison which is about 20 kilometres to the south of the City of Kuala Lumpur and I must admit that it is still in its infancy and provides a testing ground for more programmes catered for this group of learners later. Yet, this is another example of the effort undertaken by OUM to provide higher education for all regardless of creed, background, age, physical abilities and socio-economic status.

Internationalisation

In its contribution towards the internationalisation strategy of MOHE, OUM has ventured into the international higher education arena. It now has learning centres in Bahrain, Yemen and the Maldives. Currently, the Bahrain centre has about 600 learners and is in collaboration with the Arab Open University while the Yemen centre, in collaboration with the University of Science of Technology, has about 400 learners. Both of them conduct only post-graduate programmes. The Maldives centre in collaboration with the Villa College of Maldives conducts undergraduate programmes and currently has about 200 learners. In the very near future, that is, by the end of the year or early next year, OUM will set up new learning centres in Vietnam, Ghana and Hungary.

Awards

In recognition of its contribution towards adult higher education and lifelong learning, OUM and its senior officials have received several international and national awards despite its tender age of only 8 years old. The awards are:

Best Paper Award at the 20th Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU) Annual Conference (2006);

Technology Business Review Award for Excellence in Education Management – Provision of Continuous Education (2006);

Education Materials – Learning Skills for Open and Distance Learning, The Commonwealth of Learning (2006);

E-Learning Recognition Award, Eszterházy Károly College, Hungary (2006);

Multimedia Super Corridor Asia Pacific ICT Awards - Best of Education and Training (2006);

Technology Business Review for Excellence in Education - Continuous Learning and Adult Education (2007);

Honorary Award - Eszterhazy Karoly College, Hungary (2008);

First Runner Up for the Best Paper Award at the 22nd Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU) Annual Conference, Tianjin, China;

Asia Pacific Mobile Learning & Edutainment Advisory Panel (APACMLEAP) - Mobile Learning Initiatives Recognition (2008);

The Chancellor was conferred the Award of Highest Honor by Soka Women's College, Soka University, Japan (2008); and

The President/Vice-Chancellor was conferred the Honorary Fellow of Commonwealth of Learning by the Chairman of Commonwealth of Learning (2008)

Continuous improvements and innovation

Continuous improvements and innovation in higher education are becoming more relevant in today's globalised world in view of the rising influence of technology in our daily lives. The days when teaching and learning revolves around the classroom with teacher being the focuses of attention are numbered (OUM Today, 2008). In a universal context, no one can deny that continuous improvements and innovation are the cornerstones of growth and success of an organization regardless of its area of operation. At OUM, in addition to quality assurance, continuous improvements and innovation particularly in its internal processes are the central to and foremost in our daily activities. Its staff are constantly reminded of the value of continuous

improvements and innovation and encouraged to suggest new ways of doing work. For example, in June this year, we initiated a Quality Award Competition where prizes are given to the staff who submitted creative and innovative ideas as a group that are implement able by the institution.

Mobile learning

A very significant trend emerging in learning today is the increasing use of the mobile technology as its delivery mode. This is in a way not very unexpected since the use of mobile phones has increased tremendously in recent years. In Malaysia, the number of mobile phone subscribers (28.9 million) exceeded its population of 28.0 million (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, 2009). Mobile learning is effectively putting learning into the hands of the learners and this is the current wave of learning that we can no longer ignore. At OUM, we have set up a mobile-learning team that is exploring the various ways that mobile devices can be used to enhance learning among our learners and at the same time make the learning environment even more enjoyable. Presently, m learning is confined to announcements and reminders sent to learners on their submission of assignments and examinations. Soon, learning materials will be transmitted online via our mobile portal, which is currently being developed by the team.

New method of assessment

ODL institutions are not only unique in its delivery mode but also have to be unique in terms of its learner assessment. This is necessary due to the large numbers that they have to accommodate in their enrolments. This implies that the assessment methods used need to specially design to ensure that they are not only fair and equitable to the learners but to the institution in terms of ease and reliability of marking. In this regard, the use of multiple-choice questions has been widespread in all large ODL institutions such as Universitas Terbuka Indonesia (UTI) and Sukhothai Thammarat Open University (STOU) of Thailand. Since the beginning of this year, OUM has launched a special MCQ project where a team of subject matter experts (SMEs) both from the universities and industry sat down to develop an MCQ question bank. As a pilot project, 7 of its courses are now assessed using MCQ format of assessment. If this initial project succeeds, then MCQ will be introduced in many more of its courses.

Modules over i-radio

OUM does not have the advantage that other ODL institutions, such STOU and the Chinese Central Radio and Television University (CCRTU), in terms their ability to use dedicated public radio and TV channels to broadcast their study programmes. However, we recognize that at least a radio programme is necessary to provide an additional avenue for its learners to access its learning materials and other sources of references. To achieve this, an Internet radio or i-radio was launched in April 2007. Boasting a variety of shows mainly aimed to add value to OUM's learners, i-Radio is the creativity link, bridging education and information with entertainment in the hope to provide an alternative outlet for those looking for both entertainment and education in the worldwide web. Its programmes range from module-based segments where it highlights selected modules and its content, to programmes designed specifically to enhance the overall quality, not just for OUM citizens, but the general listening

population as well. Since its inception, i-radio has proven to be very popular among our learners and the general public and it was reported that its learners span over more than 100 countries worldwide.

Learner support services: Learner feedback

Another critical area that an ODL institution needs to pay attention to is learner support services. Since our learners are mainly working adults who have multiple and sometimes conflicting commitments, we have to provide the necessary support so that they are able to go through their study programmes with very little difficulties or better still, with joy and pride. At OUM, we have a dedicated centre, namely, the Centre for Student Management (CSM), to look into this important aspect of learning. This centre is also responsible for coordinating the university's retention initiatives. As is well known, the attrition rate for ODL institutions is generally higher than that of their conventional counterparts. The retention approaches undertaken by CSM are grouped into learner-focused, tutor-focused, faculty-focused, learning centre-focused and institutional focused programmes. The centre had also conducted annual learners' importance-satisfaction surveys since 2004 to obtain direct feedback from learners on the quality of services provided by OUM. I am very happy to share with the audience that the results of these surveys indicated that our learners are generally satisfied with the quality of services provided by the university (Latifah & Ramli, 2004-2007).

Dedicated staff

The success of any organization depends not on its physical infrastructure nor on the number of programmes does it offer. Instead, critical success factor is its human capital or its staff. In this regard, OUM is blessed with many highly dedicated and committed staff at all levels. Though OUM's staff currently numbers only 481, very meager compared to the other ODL institutions, they are multi-skilled and work very well as a team. They were all very carefully selected and in most cases by the President himself through very rigorous interview sessions. To further enhance their knowledge and skills, OUM conducts many training programmes and each staff is required to fulfill at least five training days in a year as one of their personal key performance Indicators (KPIs).

Unique model: A private university owned by a consortium of public universities

As mentioned earlier, OUM is a unique model whereby a private university is owned by the country's first 11 public universities. Apart from its uniqueness, the model has also contributed to the success of OUM especially in its early years of operation. When OUM first started, it has to hire academic and administrative staff from its shareholder universities, engage the expertise from their academic staff, rent their office spaces, registration centres, tutorial rooms, computer laboratories and examination halls. The modules were written by the academics from these shareholder-universities. Thanks to the support extended by these universities, OUM started on a very lean mode of operation employing the minimum number of staff as and when they are required and outsourcing many of its activities to these universities as well as the other providers. The investment in OUM is so successful that these universities by now have almost recovered their original investment of RM500, 000 each through the former's annual dividend payouts.

Learning skills module

OUM is a university primarily for working adults to pursue their dreams of enhancing their academic qualifications. Realising that working adults have a multitude of commitments and has a limited amount of time to study, OUM developed a special module that aims to assist learners to enhance their learning skills. The module is called Learning Skills for Open and Distance Learners is a mandatory subject to be taken by all new learners in the first semester of their study programme regardless of their study discipline or major. The content of the includes sections on information retrieval skills for digital library, e-learning skills using myLMS, self-managed learning by reading the printed and online modules and other learning courseware and other useful guides on how to be an effective learner in an ODL environment. The quality of the module was recognized internationally when it won the Education Materials – Learning Skills for Open and Distance Learning Award by the Commonwealth of Learning in 2006.

Issues and Challenges

Having explained OUM's role in providing quality higher education to the people, let me address some of the major issues and challenges it faces in the context of this fast growing mode of education.

Digital divide

The term digital divide usually refers to the great disparities between and within societies in the use of digital technology (Holmes, 2003). Despite Malaysia's rapid growth in internet penetration, there still exists a digital divide among its citizens in different regions and with different socio-economic backgrounds. Not only is it prevalent among its large rural communities but also among its congregated urban population (Zaitun A. B & Barbara Crump, 2005). To reach out to these groups of learners and to provide access to higher education to them is a big challenge OUM.

Learner diversity

To provide education for all, OUM has to cater for all types of learners, with not only different socio-economic backgrounds, physical capabilities and levels of academic qualifications but also with diverse learning habits and styles. Largely, ICT and e learning have helped in meeting the needs of these learners. However, ICT and e-learning are not the panacea for all. In many instances, OUM has to redesign its course structure and delivery mode to suit the needs of its learners so that they have the same opportunity to pursue higher education just like the others.

Regulatory constraints

As in many developing economies, ODL is a relatively new mode of learning which in many ways has challenged the traditional method in providing education. The degree of flexibility accorded by ODL is frequently construed as a "free-for-all" education and many traditional educationists claim that it is of lower quality when compared to the conventional way of teaching and learning. Even the regulatory authorities are not ready with the necessary regulations, guidelines and procedures to

deal with ODL institutions. To make matters worse, ODL HEIs are subjected to the same set of regulations governing the conventional HEIs. Issues such as learner-to-tutor ratios and location and content of physical libraries which are the dominant feature of traditional universities still become the focus of attention among the regulators.

Quality learning materials

I believe everyone would agree with me that quality learning materials is a prerequisite to quality learning. This is equally true and more so for ODL institutions where the face-to-face interactions between the teachers and learners are minimal and effective self-managed learning becomes a very important component of the entire learning process. In addition, the learning materials in an ODL institution have to be developed in such a way that they not only enhance learning but also make learning an enjoyable process. To cater for diverse learners, learning materials have to be present in different forms, such as printed modules, CD-ROMs, digital formats, and radio and TV broadcasts. The challenge lies not only in identifying the experts that can produce the content for the materials but also on their design and development to ensure that they become effective learning tools for learners.

Learner and Tutor readiness

Finally, for an ODL HEI to be successful there must be both learner and tutor readiness to embrace its unique mode of delivery. In the initial years of its operation, ODL is relatively unknown to the Malaysian society. Apart from a high degree of scepticism of the quality of this new education system, the Malaysia public, particularly the working adults, who belong to the relatively “older generation” were not ready to learn the way as espoused by OUM. To help learners assimilate well into the system, learning skills workshops were conducted for all new learners where they were introduced to its learning platform, my LMS and its digital library. In the same workshop, learners are taught on how to effectively use the printed modules, face-to-face interactions and online learning.

Being the first ODL institution in the country, OUM has to recruit staff from conventional educational HEIs and adequately train them to adopt the new mode of delivery. Tutor training in ODL becomes an integral part of its activities and no tutor is allowed to enter a classroom unless he or she has gone through its 2-days first-level tutor training programme. Subsequently, more advances training in ODL mode of delivery system were conducted for these tutors after they are in the system for some time.

Way Forward

Having discussed the issues and challenges that OUM has faced as a pioneer in ODL in Malaysia, allow me to offer some suggestions with regard to how best an ODL institution should go forward in providing high quality education to its learners which at par or even better than that provided by its conventional counterparts.

Full institutional commitment in the use of e-learning

First and foremost, there need to be full institutional commitment on the part of all the stakeholders of the ODL institution in the use of ICT and e-learning. The ICT and e-learning revolution has to be totally embraced by learners and teachers alike. Sporadic use of ICT and e-learning will at best lead to sub-optimisation of resources and even lead to outright failure. Efforts to win over the hard-core academics and other staff need to be intensified to ensure that everyone in the organization in tandem and in the same direction. I believe, in this regard, the commitment of the top management is most crucial as they are the ultimate drivers of the organization.

Continuous tutor training and upgrading

Knowledge and technology in the 21st century are changing rapidly that tutors and instructors need to be continually retrained to be ahead in their profession. At OUM, we had set up a centre to take care of tutor management and development aptly called the Centre for Tutor Management and Development (CTMD), whose primary activity is to conduct a special training on ODL for OUM tutors and then track their development by semester. The good tutors are promoted to Lead Tutors who, apart from being given higher remuneration are also given additional responsibilities at their respective learning centres.

Greater incorporation of e-content in modules

Another aspect that needs greater effort at OUM is the development and adoption of higher level of e-content in our modules. OUM had embarked upon this endeavour in the last five years but admittedly, there is still a lot of work to be done. The development of learning objects as well other learning courseware needs to be further intensified with the help of e-learning and learning objects experts from overseas. The target set for e-content at OUM is 30% of the overall content of each module.

Intensifying institutional R&D for further organisational & T&L improvements

Finally, right from Day One, we recognized that for our university to sustain itself and move ahead in its endeavour, there must be continuous improvements and innovation, particularly in its internal processes. In all our planning and budgeting exercises in the last six years, strengthening our internal processes has always been one of its strategic thrusts. In line with this strategy, we encourage our academic staff to conduct institutional research with the aim of identifying areas of improvements in our internal processes, particularly our delivery system and assessment methods. This effort has resulted in a greater use of mobile learning in communicating with our learners on announcements, reminders and other information. As mentioned earlier, on the assessment method, we are now developing a comprehensive question bank for our multiple choice questions (MCQs) to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the assessment system.

Conclusion

The experiences of both developed and developing countries during the last few decades have shown that ODL is a viable approach in providing an increasingly appropriate solution to enhance accessibility, affordability and flexibility in education.

Studies have shown that on the average, ODL delivery mode costs approximately 40 percent of the traditional mode. But costs alone are not a sufficient criterion in choosing a particular mode of delivery. What is more important is its quality. In this respect, we have also evidence where the materials delivered by ODL are of superior quality when compared to the traditional universities.

In tandem with its lower costs and high quality learning materials, the ODL mode can thus be propagated as the preferred mode of providing education for all in any part of the world. The proliferation of mega universities (universities with a student population of 100,000 or more) throughout the world bears testimony to the impact of ODL.

In conclusion, I strongly believe that ODL is a viable provider of quality education as exemplified by the experience of OUM. However, I must hasten to add that certain conditions must be met for it to be effective and sustainable. Firstly, there must be quality in the delivery, content and management of its programmes. Secondly, there is a need to use appropriate technologies in its operations and activities where situations permit. Thirdly, there must be continuous effort in staff training and development. Finally, there should be a culture in the system that encourages continuous improvement and innovation.